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Matters of intelligence

TEN YEARS AGO, WHEN HE WAS debating at Michigan State University, a guy dumped a bucket of whitewash over John M. Maury's head.

Maury had no trouble picking up the symbolism. The guy with the bucket obviously decided Maury's attire should match the portrait critics thought he was painting of his employer, the Central Intelligence Agency.

It was a more vivid protest than most that Maury has encountered on the lecture circuit but certainly was not untypical. On occasion, he's even needed police escorts.

But there was scarcely a ruffled feather when Maury, now president of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, matched views recently on the same program with Jerry Rubin, at the University of Pennsylvania.

"The next day," Maury says, "the school newspaper said the university was treated to visits from two relics — one from the Cold War and the other from the Yippie period — but that I, at least, seemed to believe what I was saying, while Rubin was just there showing off."

Maury has long tested the mood of his audiences by asking their views on assassinations. "Specifically," he says, "whether there are ever circumstances in a society such as ours where assassinations are justified as an instrument of policy. If we had participated in the plot to kill Hitler in 1944, for example. Would that have been good policy? What if we had done something about Hitler in 1934? Several millions of lives would have been saved."

> 'The image of the CIA has improved a good deal'

He's asked questions like that lately at the University of Arizona, at the University of Virginia, at Virginia Military Institute, Washington and Lee and Wake Forest.

"Even in what you'd call peacetime," he says, "I've yet to find a majority at any of those schools that is unalterably opposed to assassinations, although I'm not suggesting them — just thinking in terms of the problems we face."

At this point, Maury says, he usually gets more flak from college faculty members than students. And that's led him to conclude that "The image of the CIA has improved a good deal."

Maury quickly concedes, however, that it has a long way to go. Because of what he sees as "myths" that have grown up around the agency. Because of attacks by legislators and the press. Because of some "tell-all" books by former agents. And because of internal "hemorrhaging" Maury believes was precipitated by a shift from human to technical intelligence gathering during the Carter Administration.

"One persistent myth," Maury says, "is that the CIA was deeply involved with Watergate. The truth is it had virtually no involvement.

"Another myth is that the CIA has been involved in massive illegal surveillance of American citizens. Both the Johnson and Nixon administrations were very much concerned with protest activities in regard to the Vietnam War being manipulated by foreign powers. And the CIA infiltrated a handful of agents — about half a dozen — into these organizations to find out where the money was coming from.

"But there were only two cases in which information on activities by citizens in the U.S. was passed along by the agents who had infiltrated those organizations.

"The third myth is that the CIA is a 'rogue elephant' — an unguided missile or a secret weapon operating without restraints. The final conclusions of both Senate and House committees that conducted hearings on the CIA were that it simply was obedient to the particular administration it was serving."

BUT THE "MYTHS" — NO MATTER how harmful Maury may think they have been to the image of the organization he served from 1946 to 1974 in positions as diverse as chief of the Soviet Russia Division and legislative counsel — are mostly buried bones in comparison to more recent reverses, particularly internal squabbling and sagging morale under former ex-CIA director Stansfield Turner.

"There was a very substantial push during Turner's period toward technical intelligence and away from human sources," Maury says. "It's as if spies were dirty, sleazy little bastards that get you in trouble — that it was safer to go the immaculate route with electronics. So the good old boys in the dark alleys were eased out and I think we've paid for it. We have a lot of rebuilding to do, and it will take a long time — say 10 years — to bring back the credible image that will encourage the kind of recruits the CIA needs."

While America attempts to catch up with the Soviet Union in military hardware, Maury thinks our best defense could be skilled intelligence gathering. "I believe most people will agree," he says, "that the real danger of war these days is the result of miscalculation, rather than deliberate action. The best defense against miscalculation is good, human intelligence, the kind that can tell you about intentions — not just numbers."